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ABSTRACT

Society expects certain levels of literacy from its citizens. In addition, individuals have expectations for their own levels of literacy. In defining functional literacy, there is considerable disagreement over what can be expected of consumers, employees, and taxpayers. Empirical studies in Sweden attempting to establish criteria of functional literacy and to assess the degree to which school leavers and adults have achieved functional literacy have shown that if adults achieve a certain level in school, their level of literacy tends to increase and that adults tend to do much better on real-life tests than on school-type tests. These studies also indicated that even among educators there is little agreement as to what is a satisfactory level of literacy. Societal demands and expectations seem much higher than the level of performance of a majority of adults, making it important to develop reasonable standards of functional literacy. (TJ)

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ASPECTS OF FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

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The term 'functional literacy'

The term 'functional literacy' is appearing more and more often in the literature on reading. Literally interpreted the term seems to have a clear meaning: 'functional literacy' is the degree of literacy which is sufficient for the individual's proper 'functioning' in his environment. The meaning of the term is, however, far from clear, when we start asking questions such as:

> In what situations should the individual be functioning thanks to his literacy?
>
> What standard of functioning should be demanded?
>
> What is 'sufficient' in this context? And for whom is it 'sufficient'?

The term 'functional literacy' was, to begin with, used in discussions of what proficiency levels should be attempted in literacy programs, particularly in countries where complete illiteracy was widespread. The concept seems to have developed out of the insight that 'literacy' in the traditional, rather narrow sense was no longer an adequate educational goal.

In countries with large numbers of totally illiterate young people

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and adults, an important educational aim was naturally to help everybody to achieve basic literacy, that is to be able to read and write simple sentences in his mother tongue. Gradually, however, the importance of more advanced reading a d writing skills for the development of a society became more generally acknowledged. And educators also began to realize that literacy is not a simple, indivisible ability. On the contrary, it is the entire, complex ability to use written language for purposes of communication in an almost infinite range of areas and situations.

Literacy in this sense is not just the ability to 'recode' print into the sounds of spoken language or, conversely, to 'recode' those sounds into print. It is a multi-faceted communication ability. Consequently, it does not make much sense to ask if a person is 'literate' or 'illiterate', except as a means of differentiating between those who are completely illiterate and those who have achieved some - however modest - degree of literacy. Instead of asking about a person "Is he literate?", we should ask "How literate is he?" or "Is his literacy sufficiently developed for him to function properly in his various roles in his society?"

Literacy and the demands of society

Functional literacy has hitherto mainly been seen as the ability to use reading and writing skills for various so called practical purposes. It is often related to the reading and writing the individual has to cope with, if he wants to hold down a job, or function as a sensible consumer, or fulfil his duties as a taxpayer and as a participant in the political process of a democratic society. Reading for pleasure and for personal development and edification has been seen as falling outside the domain of

functional literacy. The ability of the individual citizen to function properly in his role as 'homo economicus and politicus' is certainly extremely important to the wellbeing of a society. It would be very unfortunate, though, if this role were too narrowly defined. An individual's private reading is potentially a significant factor in his development of a better understanding of himself, his fellow men and his environment. In this process of development, the 'private person' cannot be isolated from the 'public person' - the two are one, and in the field of literacy we must be concerned with the development of the entire person.

The notion that functional literacy is mainly a question of acquiring certain practical reading and writing skills suggests that the problem is seen mainly from the viewpoint of society - or rather the authorities of society - and their demands on the individual. According to this view, an individual is functionally literate when he can cope with the reading and writing situations which society's authorities and established institutions expect him to cope with.

It is clearly of great importance for a society to try to find out to what extent its citizens have acquired the degree of literacy that is expected of them by representatives of various authorities and institutions. But this aspect of functional literacy should not be allowed to dominate totally, at the expense of other aspects. Nor must we allow ourselves to forget that expectations can be more or less reasonable and realistic, which, in turn, means that some of the 'burden of proof' should always rest with those who have, or who create, expectations, so that unreasonable expectations do not prevail.

Individual demands for literacy

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Functional literacy must always be seen in relation to the demands

of society, although we may have reason to see to it that these demands are less narrowly conceived than is sometimes the case today. Functional literacy can, however, also be seen in terms of the individual's own perception of his need for reading and writing abilities. No individual can afford to disregard completely the expectations of his society in this respect, but different individuals will find different expectations and demands more or less important, depending on their personal situations and personalities.

We can see all the various aspects of reading and writing ability as a 'literacy profile', where an individual's degree of proficiency can vary in each and every aspect of literacy, and where his proficiency in all the aspects constitutes his personal 'literacy profile'. Depending on the needs, interests and aspirations of the individual, a literacy profile which is fully adequate for one person may be grossly inadequate for another. That is, a given literacy profile may be individually functional for one person, but non-functional or at least dysfunctional for another. Also, a literacy profile which is regarded as societally functional i.e. functional from the point of view of society, may not be functional from the point of view of the individual. On the other hand, an individual may, depending on his personal circumstances, his background etc., be genuinely satisfied with a literacy profile which is regarded as not functional from the point of view of his society.

Difficulties in defining functional literacy

Both individually determined and societally determined functional literacy are difficult to define. The individual may not be able to articulate his needs sufficiently well, and the very fact that his ability is rather poor may prevent him from perceiving his

need for a more highly developed ability. Programs of further education for adults are faced with this problem in that those who seem to be most in need of further education often fail to grasp the opportunities offered them, whereas those who are somewhat better educated to begin with are typically quick to realize the advantages of further education.

A societally defined functional literacy, on the other hand, presupposes considerable consensus as to what should reasonably be expected of the citizens. What can be expected of the consumer? Of the employee? Of the taxpayer? Of the voter? Etc. Unless we want to define functional literacy differently for different groups or classes of people, this kind of functional literacy must probably be defined as a minimum 'literacy profile', which every adult member of society needs, regardless of whether he also has other literacy needs as an individual. What society expects of its citizens must, of course, depend on the needs of each particular society, but it must also depend on the capacity of the citizens to develop literacy skills. Trying to balance these two demands may well be like navigating between the Scylla of frustration due to demands that are impossible to satisfy, and the Charybdis of complacency, where 'demand' becomes a dirty word.

Due to the enormous difficulties involved in trying to assess directly the needs for literacy, be it from the viewpoint of society or from that of the individual, it has become customary to define minimal functional literacy in terms of a grade level or a reading age. For example, in international discussions of literacy and illiteracy within UNESCO, it used to be suggested, as a kind of rule of thumb, that it takes at least four years of schooling to reach functional literacy. That is, an individual

is not functionally literate until he has reached the literacy level of the average pupil at the end of the fourth grade.

One serious problem with a grade level criterion of functional literacy, particularly from an international point of view, is that the amount and quality of literacy training during the first four school years can vary considerably, as can the age at which children start school - and consequently the age at which they normally leave grade 4 of the primary school. One way of trying to avoid this difficulty is to define minimal functional literacy in terms of a reading age, or rather 'literacy age'. The International Institute for Adult Literacy Methods in Iran has recently suggested (in their journal Literacy Work, vol. 4, no. 2) that the ability level reached by the average 13-year-old should be regarded as the minimum level needed for functional literacy. 'Literacy age' suffers, however, from the same kind of weakness as 'literacy grade level'. The ability level of the average 13-year-old is to a great extent dependent on the educational system, its curriculum, its resources in terms of teachers, materials, teaching time, etc.

There is, as far as I can see, no immediate way out of this dilemma as regards the definition of functional literacy, whether it is in terms of grade level or 'literacy age'. One important consequence of this is that international comparisons can only be made in cases where the national educational systems involved are fairly similar. This does not mean, however, that a literacy age or grade level criterion cannot be very useful within a national system of education.

Empirical studies of functional literacy in Sweden

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During the years 1970-1976 I carried out quite extensive

research in Sweden with the dual aim of helping to establish useful criteria of functional literacy, and of assessing the degree to which school leavers and adults have achieved functional literacy (Grundin 1975 & 1977). These studies made it possible to define criterion levels of reading and writing abilities in terms of grade level equivalents. For example, the reading ability of the average pupil at the end of each grade of the comprehensive school, from grade 3 to grade 9, could be established. (This corresponds in Sweden to the age levels 10 to 16.) Once these criterion levels had been defined, it was possible to estimate, for each age group or grade level, what proportion of the individuals had - or had not - reached a given literacy level.

The study of school leavers showed that about 15 per cent of each age group leaves the 9 year, compulsory comprehensive school at the age of 16, without having reached grade 6 literacy level, that is, the level attained by the average pupil at the end of grade 6, at the age of 13 years. A subsequent study of adults aged 25 - 35 years indicated that between 7 and 13 per cent of each age group is not functionally literate according to this grade 6 criterion. Among 25-year-olds with an average of 11½ years of schooling about 7 per cent were not functionally literate according to the grade 6 criterion, whereas among the 35-year-olds with, on the average, only 8½ years of schooling 13 per cent were not functionally literate according to this criterion.

These results indicate that whether or not people reach functional literacy depends to a great extent on the amount (and presumably also the quality) of the schooling they have had. The increased compulsory schooling in Sweden during the 1950s and 1960s seems

to have paid off through, among other things, a considerable increase in the number of people who reach or surpass the minimal functional literacy level defined by the grade 6 criterion. But the results also indicate very clearly that what might be called the 'school of life' contributes significantly to the development of literacy skills. Both 25-year-olds and 35-year-olds with, for example, 9 years of schooling, performed better on reading and writing tests than did school leavers with the same amount of schooling behind them.

Assessing literacy through 'real-life' tasks

The test battery used in these studies in Sweden contained both tests of the kind normally used in school (reading comprehension, spelling etc.) and tests of more practically oriented, 'real-life' skills, such as the comprehension of forms and insurance policies. This latter kind of test can be seen as criterion-referenced with regard to expectations of literacy in the Swedish society. The results on these tests show that the ability of most young adults to cope successfully with 'real-life' tasks increases considerably in the years after they have left school. There is, as a matter of fact, a marked difference between the results on the school-type tests, where performance only improves slightly after the school years, and the 'real-life' tests, where the experiences of adult life seem to bring about a great deal of improvement in people's ability to cope with the authentic literacy tasks.

The comparisons between adults and school leavers did show one very important exception to the general rule that adults perform better than school leavers - and in the case of 'real-life' literacy tasks, considerably better. The poorest 5 per cent of the school leavers do not seem to improve their skills at all

after they have left school. There is even reason to believe that many of these very poor readers suffer a decrease in ability during the early years of adult life. So, although some deficiences in the reading and writing abilities of school leavers are compensated for through the continuous development after the school years in the 'school of life', those who most need to improve their abilities do not benefit from this development during adulthood. This suggests a threshold effect. Those who have reached a certain level before leaving school can further develop their literacy skills by benefiting from the experiences of adult life. But those who have not managed to pass the threshold before leaving school seem unable to benefit from their experiences later in life. They even seem to have a great struggle sustaining the low levels of literacy they achieved during their school years.

What is a satisfactory level of literacy?

These studies of school leavers and adults yielded a great deal of interesting and useful data regarding basic reading and writing skills, and thus regarding the problem of functional literacy in Sweden. Attempts were also made in the studies to assess what constitutes satisfactory literacy levels in various respects, and whether there is a reasonable degree of consensus about what constitutes satisfactory degrees of literacy. An enquiry among over 700 experienced secondary school teachers of Swedish was carried out in order to determine what importance teachers attach to different aspects of reading and writing ability, and what performance levels they regard as satisfactory for various categories of school leavers.

The results of this enquiry show very clearly how difficult it

is to judge what is "satisfactory performance" on a given set of tasks. About 5 per cent of the teachers found the task impossible, and another 5 per cent said that they would have to know what the pupils actually could perform, before the could judge what constitutes "satisfactory performance". This reflects, of course, the highly complex relationship between observation of that which is, conclusion concerning that which can be under ideal circumstances, and judgment about that which ought to be. Those teachers who did judge what constitues "satsifactory performance" in school leavers, showed that there is a very great variation in opinion in this respect. I will give just one example: for a reading comprehension test with 15 questions, some grade 9 teachers thought that nothing less than 12 points out of 15 was satisfactory for the average 16-year-old, while other teachers found as low a score as 4 out of 15 satisfactory for the same category of pupils. The average teacher expectation did coincide with the average pupil performance, but the variation in teacher expectations indicates that there is very little consensus as to what constitutes "satisfactory performance" for a given category of pupils. These teachers belong to a relatively homogeneous group, so one probably must expect even less consensus among all the various groups of people who determine a society's expectations of literacy.

In my study of adults' reading and writing skills, attempts were made to assess the adults' satisfaction with their own abilities. The majority of the participants claimed that they were satisfied with their 'literacy profile', but a substantial minority of more than 40 per cent were dissatisfied with one aspect or other of their literacy attainment. 25 per cent found their skills insufficient for their occupational tasks, and more than 30 per cent found their skills insufficient for the leisure time activities //

they would like to engage in - if they had better literacy skills. This suggests that in an adult population of 6 million people, more than 2 million people feel that they need to improve their 'literacy profiles'.

It is noteworthy that there is little correlation between actual ability and the individual's satisfaction with his ability. Many individuals have reached a literacy level which is high, judged by the average for their age group, but which is still not sufficient for their personal needs. And others are quite satisfied with a literacy level which, from the point of view of society, would be described as 'non-functional'.

Literacy development towards reasonable goals

The inclusion of 'real-life' reading and writing tasks in my studies made it possible to assess the degree of realism in some of the expectations of literacy in the Swedish society. I have mentioned that the adults did much better on these tasks than the school leavers, but that does not necessarily mean that the performance of the adults was 'good'. In fact, judged by the demands which these authentic tasks imply, most adults perform below what those who set the tasks seem to expect. For example, forms with which every adult who has a job is expected to cope, were completed correctly only by a minority. If the criterion for acceptable performance is set at 80 per cent of the maximum, 'perfect' score, we find that still only 37 per cent of the adults performed acceptably.

Obviously, there is a great discrepancy between some of society's demands and expectations, and the abilities of large numbers of adults to fulfil them. Judging by the standards set by various authentic tasks, one may feel inclined to label the majority of

Sweden's adult population as not functionally literate. The fact that so many people cannot cope with the tasks set before them may certainly create many problems, but the existence of a great discrepancy between expected and actual literacy does not tell us what is the main cause of the problems. If the reader cannot cope with the task, there may be something wrong with his ability, or with the task - or with both. As there are two sides to the problem, we must look for solutions on both sides. There is a need for much improvement in the 'literacy profiles' of many individuals and not only among those who now have the poorest skills. My studies have shown that increased and improved schooling can contribute to this improvement, and they have also shown that many adults are aware of their needs for better literacy skills. Recognizing the need for improvement does not mean, however, that we should be complacent about all the present demands for literacy. People should not be regarded as lacking in functional literacy simply because they cannot cope with all the tasks other people expect them to cope with.

When we encourage young people to develop as far as possible their literacy skills, we owe it to them to set goals which are high, but at the same time realistic and reasonable. If the goals are not high enough, opportunities for further development will be missed. But if the goals are unreasonable, they can have a demoralizing effect and lead to pessimism and defeatism. Both society's expectations and the individuals' self-expectations need to be carefully scrutinized. Educators have the double task of stimulating the development of all individuals, and of critically examining and, if need be, redefining the demands and expectations that set the standards for teaching and learning. In the context of this double task we must continue our efforts to help young

people to develop a literacy which is functional both from their own viewpoint and from the viewpoint of society.

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